RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHERYL CLARKE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI
and
JOSEPH KAPLAN

HOBART, NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 21, 2018

TRANSCRIPT BY

MOLLY GRAHAM

Kathryn Rizzi: This begins an interview with Cheryl Clarke on Friday, September 21, 2018, in Hobart, New York. The interviewers are Kate Rizzi and …

Joe Kaplan: Joe Kaplan.

KR: Cheryl, thank you so much for having us into your home.

Cheryl Clarke: You're welcome. Thank you for driving all the way up here. You said Hobart correctly. That's how they say it here, Hobart. [Editor's Note: Hobart is pronounced as "Hobert."]

KR: You told me the other day, so I remembered.

CC: Did I? Okay, good.

KR: Yes, thank you. To begin, where and when were you born?

CC: I was born May 16, 1947 in Washington, D.C.

KR: Let us talk about your family history. What do you know about your family history, starting on your mother's side?

CC: Not much. I know my mother originally came from North Carolina at a very young age, maybe three or four, with her parents. I think they migrated at the same time. They migrated to Washington, D.C. I guess we might say that was part of the Great Migrations of black people leaving the rural South. [Editor's Note: From the 1910s to the 1970s, over six million African Americans relocated from the South to Northeastern, Midwestern and Western cities, a shift now known as the Great Migration.]

My mother was born in Marion, North Carolina--not that I knew that from her because she didn't really want to talk about her past. She wanted to start it at Washington, D.C. Marion is near Hickory. It's in the northwestern part of North Carolina. My mother was born in 1916. They migrated soon after that. She had a sister who was two years younger. They came to Washington. They settled in Georgetown. That's before Georgetown got so tony, before the Kennedys moved in. That's where she grew up. She had very fond memories of Georgetown.

She married a man before she married my father and had two children. So, I had an older brother and sister, when she married my father in 1945 or '46. She worked for the city government for thirty-five years. She worked for the Recorder of Deeds in Washington. That was a place where a lot of black people worked for some reason.

She was a very strong woman. I was always very proud of her. She was beautiful. At the time she was coming up, they believed in glamour because they were so affected by Hollywood, seriously. You think I'm kidding, but seriously--the sunglasses, the Hollywood glamour.

My father was born in Washington. He was born in Georgetown. His father was born in Washington. I think his mother was born in Maryland--I'm not sure--but soon settled in Georgetown. Whereas my mother's family were rural, my father's family was very urban and very lower-middle class, but they had a longevity in the city, whereas my mother's parents were recent migrants. There was that kind of class difference.

My parents knew each other since they were teenagers, but they didn't get married until 1946. I was born in '47. My younger sister was born in '51. Then, I have--I shouldn't say "then" in that way--I have a third sister who was adopted. Actually, she was the oldest child of my oldest sister. My parents adopted her, because my sister didn't want to take care of her. The three of us were raised together as sisters. Well, I'm saying that, because that was a big tension in our family. My youngest sister still lives in the D.C. area.

My father was Catholic. His father was Catholic. His mother was Baptist, very interesting. My father was an altar boy. My mother wanted us to be raised as Catholic, so we could go to the Catholic schools, because at that time, you could only go to Catholic schools if you were Catholic. She felt the education would be better because they both believed in that thing about education. They wanted us to be really educated. We went to Catholic schools. I went from the second to the twelfth [grade]. My sister went from the first to the twelfth. My youngest sister went from the first to the ninth and then she transferred to a public school. Then, I went to Howard. I'm going over my childhood too quickly.

KR: If it is okay, I would like to ask a couple follow-up questions.

CC: Sure.

KR: When your mother's parents moved to Washington, D.C., what did they do for work?

CC: They did very menial work. I think my grandmother cooked for white people. I'm not quite sure what my grandfather did. He was very, very light skinned. If you saw him, you would think he was white. He was really country. When I got older and he was still working, he washed dishes or he ran the machines that washed dishes in restaurants. By the time I was getting to know my mother's mother, she wasn't working. She became very ill with diabetes later on in her life. I'm not quite sure really what they did. I know he was working when, as a child, you begin to develop some consciousness of your surroundings. He was working, but my grandmother wasn't.

KR: What about on your father's side? What did your father's parents do for work?

CC: Well, my father's father, who was quite a bit older than his mother, died before World War II. I really don't know what he did. My grandmother worked for the federal

government. She worked for the Bureau of Engraving. Now, I don't know what she did. My younger sister claims she was a charwoman. You know what I mean by charwoman?

KR: No. Can you say what that means?

CC: Custodial worker. She cleaned. I said, "No, she didn't." Because my father used to pick her up every week and give her a ride home. She would not be in those uniforms that they wear. My sister said, "Well, of course she changed into her street clothes before she came out." I said, "No, she didn't." This is recent. I'm talking about two years ago. It wasn't when we were little. I remember asking my father what she did at the Bureau of Engraving. My father said, "I think she's a timekeeper." That might have meant she had to keep the time of the people that worked under her or with her. I'm not quite sure what she did. I know she worked for the Bureau of Engraving. She retired from there. My father's sister, I think she also worked for the Bureau of Engraving, but I know she wasn't doing any char-work, my father's sister. They all worked for the government.

My father worked for the Bureau of Standards. He was a security guard. He worked there for thirty-five years. My uncle, he worked for the city government. My aunt, my mother's sister, worked for the Veterans Administration for many years. Then, she transferred to Detroit to work for the Veterans Administration there. All these people are dead now, but they all worked for the government.

KR: What do you know about the military service of people in your family?

CC: My father served in World War II, from 1941 to 1945. My aunt's husband, my uncle by marriage, he served in the South Pacific. I'm trying to think of somebody. My brother, who was eleven years older than I, he was in the Air Force for four years, from the time he was eighteen until he was twenty-two. I guess he came out in the late '50s. Let me think of somebody else that I know. Neither of my father's brothers served because they weren't drafting you if you had a family. Both of them had family. That's all I can think of right now, in terms of my [family]. Oh, forgot my aunt. My mother's sister was a WAC [Women's Army Corps], but she didn't serve for too long. She only joined so she could get over where she thought she could be near the man she wanted to marry, but it didn't work like that. [laughter]

KR: Where was that?

CC: Wherever he was in the South Pacific.

KR: I see.

CC: I think, yes, she thought she would be able to be with him. When she found out she couldn't, she tried to get out, but you can't get out of the service. She was in the service from late in the war until the war ended.

KR: Was your father drafted?

CC: Yes, he was.

KR: Do you know any details about his service?

CC: A slight detail. He was in England. Then, he was in France. He drove supply trucks. I remember seeing a documentary on TV about D-Day, June the 6th 1940-whenever. I should really know.

KR: 1944.

CC: I was saying to him, "Did you see that documentary on TV about D-day?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "The troops landed on June 6, 1944, and we drove our supply trucks there on June the 7th and they didn't mention us." That was the first I ever heard of that. He talked quite a bit about his service because it was a real defining moment for him, even though he was thirty-one when he went in, but, yes, I do know that detail.

KR: What else did he tell you about his service?

CC: Dumb stuff like having his teeth extracted, dumb stuff, not anything really serious, about how the day he had to report for duty his mother could not take off from work, so he had to leave before he was able to say goodbye to her, before she was able to say goodbye to him. I guess people couldn't just take off in those days, like we can now. That's about as much as I can remember right now that he said. If I remember anything else during this interview, I'll tell you. He didn't talk about [segregation]. I asked him one time--he was so crazy-- I asked him one time, "Well, what about the segregation?" He said, "We needed to be with each other," something like that. People don't want to talk about stuff that might cause them discomfort or pain. They want to preserve the good memories, what they think are good memories.

KR: What he did in France, that was the Red Ball Express. [Editor's Note: The term "Red Ball Express" describes the logistical supply line established by African American trucking units of the U.S. Army from the Normandy beachhead to the front in Northern Europe in the summer and fall of 1944.]

CC: Yes.

KR: There has been a lot that has been written and studied about it recently.

CC: Yes. Well, I was reading about it online. I actually wrote a poem that included that. I was so surprised when he told me that because I knew he drove supply trucks. I also knew that he could drive really well. He was really an excellent driver. He had learned how to drive really well.

KR: I just have one more question about your father's military service. Did he ever say where he deployed overseas from? A lot of people going over to Europe would have gone through Camp Kilmer.

CC: I don't think he went through Camp Kilmer. I don't think he did. I remember him talking about leaving from Bayonne. I don't know what camp he went to. He was in the Army. He didn't say anything about Camp Kilmer, not that I can remember.

KR: How did your parents meet?

CC: They knew each other as teenagers. I think their first time going out was when my mother was fourteen and he was eighteen. They went to some kind of amusement park. My father slipped and told me one time--he said it to me as if I had known about it all my life--he said that his family lived across the street from my mother's first husband's family, but she and my father met when she was fourteen. She didn't get married to her first husband until she was seventeen or eighteen. They married young in those years.

KR: What was it like growing up in Washington, D.C.?

CC: Well, I know I couldn't wait to leave. As I said, I went to Catholic schools all my life. We first lived in an apartment complex like a projects in Northeast. Then, we moved in 1952 or '53 to a house on Fifth Street near Soldiers Home in Northwest. We lived there, I guess, until I was about eight. That must have been about five years. That meant my father, my mother, me, my younger sister and my older sister and brother. Then, my older sister had her baby.

Then, in 1957, we moved further up in Northwest, Seventh and Madison, off of Georgia Avenue, going toward Walter Reed Hospital. We were trying to move up. This was a bigger house. That's where I did most of my growing up. I lived in that house with my parents until I was twenty-two. That would have been 1969. At that point, in 1969, I moved to New Brunswick.

I couldn't wait to get out of Washington, D.C. I experienced it as very--well, it was elitist and very heterosexual. There was a lot of pressure to have boyfriends, which as girls we began to feel when we were barely twelve or thirteen. That's why I'm glad I went to Catholic school because some of that pressure was off because I went to an all-girls high school. Still, your friends, they all had boyfriends or they wanted them. I was less interested in boys than I was trying to get my studies done. That was how it was. It was a lot of pressure to be heterosexual, not that I was anything other than heterosexual at that point because I didn't come out as a lesbian until '73. By that time, I had been in New Jersey several years, almost five or six years. That was how it was.

I had several jobs when I was in college. I worked for the Peace Corps for a couple of years. Then, I ended up--these were all part-time jobs--at the *Washington Post*, which was a very interesting experience. That was also part time. I was a typist. I had interesting job experiences. I didn't drive, so I enjoyed the public transportation system,

which is very good in Washington. I went to a lot of parties because Washington is a big party town, a big black party town.

Washington, for the most part, was a majority black town while I was growing up. I guess it still is. So, the transition was interesting to go from a place like Washington to go to a place like New Brunswick, which was very small, friendly. People in Washington weren't friendly. New Brunswick was friendly. They spoke to you. I said, "Oh, this is interesting." A lot of white people, but still, a lot of black people, too, in New Brunswick. Then, I came to Rutgers at the time when Rutgers was just beginning to recruit more black and Latino students. That was very interesting.

I should have mentioned that I went to Howard for four years. That was a vastly interesting experience, because I got to be not only exposed to Black Power politics but exposed to black scholars, people whom the university had not honored came to the forefront at that point during the Black Power Movement, people like Sterling Brown, who hated Howard, was honored. A lot of people took his courses, and other black scholars-- Chancellor Williams, who wrote--what is the name of that crazy book he wrote?

JK: *The Destruction of Black Civilization*.

CC: Something *Civilization*. [Editor's Note: Dr. Clarke is referring to Chancellor Williams's book *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race Between 4500 B.C. and 2000 A.D.*] He was a very good teacher. He was excellent. He was almost blind. He wore these big, dark glasses. He was a lovely person. He was a lovely teacher. He knew a lot. Of course, he did. He said, "I just want you to know before we get started," because we had to use [British historian] Basil Davidson's--they all used his book--he says, "Before we get started, I just want you to know that I know as much or more as any of these people you're reading." I said, "Okay, fine."

The Destruction of African Civilization, I think that's what it was. It wasn't published at the time I had him. Yes, that was Chancellor. He came in one time and he said, "Young people, I give my lecture on Malcolm X every year. This is the day I'm going to do it." He gave us this beautiful lecture on the importance of Malcolm X. He said, "Malcolm X is a man who stands out in history. There's no one else like him." He was real good.

I'm trying to think of some other people. I had Arthur Davis, who was the editor of *The Negro Caravan* back then in the '40s, '49. I think he and Sterling Brown edited it. I had him for a lit [literature] course. Basically, all he did was reminisce about people he knew during the Harlem Renaissance. He was funny. That's it. We might be reading Countee Cullen. We were reading all of them. His course was a survey course, so we went from Phillis Wheatley to LeRoi Jones. He said, "Young people, allow me to reminisce about Countee for a minute." He said, "My wife and I and Countee and his fiancé," who was W.E.B. Du Bois' daughter [Yolande Du Bois], "We went from Harlem to Brooklyn for an affair. We took a cab. We went. Then we took a cab back." You know how far it is from Harlem to Brooklyn. Forever. He said, "We took a cab back." We had a nice time.

He said, "Yolande said to Countee, 'Countee, I left my scarf.'" He said, "We had to go all the way back to Brooklyn to get her scarf and come all the way back." He said, "I told my wife at that time that that marriage would never last." And it didn't because he was gay. That was really funny. He was really funny. He died a long time ago. He was in his nineties when he died. That was Howard. I had a good time there. There were demonstrations every day. When I came to Rutgers, it was the same thing.

KR: If I could go back a little bit and ask you a few questions about your childhood, then we will work our way up. I just have a few questions about childhood. You talked about your neighborhood in Northwest and the two different places that you lived. Describe your neighborhood and what it was like.

CC: In Northwest, it was all black, because what was happening--as black people, like my family, moved into that Northwest area, the white people were fleeing to the suburbs. White flight, it's real. They were moving further and further into Maryland or further and further out into Virginia. My neighborhood was all black. Then, when we moved again further up into Northwest, it was all black. The church we went to--let's put it this way--when I started Catholic school in second grade, I was maybe one of five black kids in the class. By the time I graduated from the eighth grade, the school was all black, again, reflecting the white flight phenomenon, but [in] the church, the white parishioners would come back to the church on Sunday. That was my experience of my neighborhood. It was black.

KR: What do you remember about segregation in Washington, D.C., when it was still Jim Crow Washington, D.C.?

CC: I remember there were certain stores you didn't go into because they wouldn't wait on black people, certain stores down in the Federal Triangle area of D.C., going toward the White House, but really over from the White House. I remember knowing not to go into these stores. I remember several experiences of going into stores, like drug stores or whatever, and not being waited on or having white people waited on before me. All of the movie theaters were segregated. Black people went to one of three movie theaters in Washington, D.C., the Lincoln, the Republic and the Booker T. I remember going to those movie theaters. Also, it was the time of neighborhood theaters. If your neighborhood theater was in a black section, of course, all black people went there. I remember when the movie theaters began to, what they call, integrate, so that theaters in the downtown section of Washington, black people began to be able to go there.

Washington was really very Jim Crow. I remember going with my mother when I was little actually, and I remember this very well, we went to have lunch at a fountain. You know what I mean. All these black people standing up eating. White people sitting down.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: We are back on the record.

CC: Anyway, black people lined up, standing up eating. White people sitting down. I was too little to reach the counter. So, they found a milk crate for me to stand on. It was so funny. I didn't know what was going on then, but I remembered that that was what happened. I have very mild experiences of anti-black feeling in Washington, discrimination, yes, mild compared to some.

When I went to high school, I think there were about maybe two hundred or three hundred girls in the school, and maybe ten of us were black. Again, by the time I graduated, the whole school was black. We just celebrated, two years ago, our fiftieth reunion. Almost everybody is white. I'm going down again next month for, I guess, it's our fifty-second reunion. That was the experience.

I also remember not being encouraged to go to college by the nuns. My mother was the one that was pushing us to go to college. If she hadn't been doing it, we wouldn't have gone because the nuns weren't encouraging us. In fact, they were encouraging me to take a business curriculum. I said, "I don't want to take business." I knew how to type. That's fine. I said, "I'm going to college," but I didn't receive any encouragement to go. That was my experience of segregation and discrimination.

KR: What type of travel did your family do?

CC: Not much. When we were really young, I'd say five to eight, we went to Atlantic City. That was always fun. Again, very segregated, black people had a part of the beach they could go to and be on. You could walk the whole length of the damn boardwalk, but you didn't go and integrate in an all-white section of the beach. You just went to your part. There was a strip in Atlantic City. You know Atlantic City, they had streets named after all the states. It was Kentucky Avenue. That's where all the black people went who were tourists in Atlantic City. That was the farthest we went for vacation.

My parents took off two weeks each year in August. We went around Washington. We went to all the monuments. If I never see another monument in my life, that will be too soon. We did that every year, but we didn't do any travel really.

KR: How politically active were your parents?

CC: Well, my mother was a lifelong Democrat. We couldn't vote in Washington until 1961. Washingtonians didn't have the vote, but my mother was a lifelong Democrat. My father, he always went along with her. She was very savvy about the political scene. She was very smart. She was politically conscious, I would say.

KR: What did she teach you?

CC: That's a good question. Besides how to be a bitch, you mean? Well, she taught me persistence really. She gave me a love of learning, particularly a love of reading, which we developed very early. Well, yes, as I say, she taught me how to be tough. I wish she

had taught us a little bit more about money, because she knew a lot about money. She knew how to save it. She knew how to make it. But, of course, she didn't teach us that. She could have taught me that because I sure could have used it. She gave me a love for education. I want to say she gave me the desire to be offbeat, not status quo, because I knew she wasn't status quo even though she tried to pretend like she was. I knew she'd had a tough time coming up because she had to be a mother very early and her first husband was an alcoholic, so she had to get out of that marriage and she had to stay working. Independence, that's another thing she taught me. That's a good question because I need to think more about what she did teach me.

KR: You can come back to it later if you think of anecdotes or stories.

CC: Yes.

KR: I wanted to ask what your earliest recollections are of the major events and milestones of the Civil Rights Movement.

CC: One of my earliest memories--and this will include my mother--is in North Carolina and I guess all over the South, the movement was demonstrating against Woolworth's. We had a big Woolworth's in Washington in a major black commercial district, 14th Street. My mother used to take us. My mother loved to shop. She used to take us. That's what she taught me too, a love for shopping, to my detriment. She used to take us over there every weekend. When I got to be about fourteen, I decided I could go by myself. I went there, and there were demonstrators in front of Woolworth's. Of course, I wanted to go into Woolworth's, so I crossed the picket line. This woman said to me, "Why are you going in there? Don't go in." I just went in. I bought whatever I had to buy, came out and went home. I said, "Well, they were picketing Woolworth's and I went in anyway." My mother said, "Don't ever do something against somebody who's doing something for you." That's one thing.

She was also a staunch unionist. She was very active in the government employees union in D.C. It was a government employees union. That was one of my earliest memories. [Editor's Note: The union referred to above is the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE).]

Then, when I was going to high school, I used to have to take the bus from one side of town to another. Northwest is really big. I had to take it from--I'm trying to think if I can get you to see how far I had to travel to get to this Catholic high school. I was talking about Harlem to Brooklyn. It was about like that, Harlem to Brooklyn, maybe 125th Street to the Brooklyn Bridge. In going to school, I had to pass the White House. The bus went by the White House. There were always demonstrations going on there every day practically. Sometimes I would get off the bus and join the demonstration, march around, then go to school. Those were some early memories.

Let me see. I don't remember the Emmet Till murder. That was 1955. Actually, I've been thinking about that lately. Almost can't forget it, but I don't remember that, oddly

enough. I was about eight then. I do remember the murders of the three men in Mississippi. Just like the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement was carried over the television. Interesting, I remember because my aunt lived with us. Actually, she wasn't my aunt. She was married to my grandmother's cousin. He was long dead, but she lived with us. She was also a charwoman. She retired from the government, too. I remember when they found those bodies. My aunt said, "Yes, I knew they would find those bodies as soon as somebody offered a reward." I remember that. What else? [Editor's Note: Emmett L. Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago, was tortured, disfigured and murdered on August 28, 1955, while visiting family in Money, Mississippi. Roy Bryant, with his half-brother J. W. Milam, committed the murder after Till spoke to his wife, Carolyn, in their grocery store. At the public viewing in Chicago, tens of thousands of mourners saw Till's mutilated remains. Bryant and Milam were acquitted of the slaying, though they openly admitted to committing the murder in an interview later. The brutal murder and the failure to bring Till's killers to justice galvanized many Americans to support civil rights action in Mississippi. Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were murdered by Ku Klux Klan members while working as civil rights volunteers in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. They had been trying to register African American voters as part of the Mississippi Summer Project.]

Of course, I went to the March on Washington in 1963 with my parents. That was an experience. We went home before all the speeches were made, but I remember not going to school that day even though it was a--did they have school that day? No, they didn't have school that day because they were afraid all the black people would take over Washington. They told us we didn't have to come to school. Actually, my school was very near the White House. That was why I would pass it on the bus every day. Going there was a defining moment, I would say, for me because it taught me the importance of standing up for myself or standing up for my belief in myself. Also, it taught me to reject so-called second-class citizenship--second-class citizenship for some, third class for others. [Editor's Note: On August 28, 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was held on the National Mall, during which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made his famous "I Have A Dream" speech.]

Then, of course, in 1966, the year after I started college, came the call for Black Power, which was also very defining too because it taught me to reject Black Nationalism because of how authoritarian Black Nationalists were. There were plenty of them at Howard. Howard got very political during those years, which was good. It needed to. There's no point sitting up being bourgeois. There were a lot of demonstrations there in sympathy with events that were going on in Selma, Alabama, Greenwood, Mississippi, Albany, Georgia. Greenwood was where Stokely Carmichael called for Black Power. Stokely Carmichael was a Howard graduate. He was on campus quite a bit. Yes, he was on campus quite a bit.

I remember the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968--I guess I'm skipping around, but 1968--I was at work that night. I was at *The Post*. Of course, they were all going crazy in there because Martin Luther King had been shot and then he died.

They had us working like crazy, typing news stories as they were coming in. My mother came to pick me up. We went home. The next day I went to class. People were gathering on campus in front of Frederick Douglass Hall, which was where everything took place. It was a platform. Stokely was on campus. He was stirring people up. He was so dramatic. The FBI tried to blame the riots in D.C. on him.

I got on the bus and went to work. By the time I got to Florida Avenue and Seventh Street NW, people were rioting. I was able to get to work. Don't ask me why I went to work. I guess because I wanted to see what was happening. I had no idea that a riot was going on until I rode through it. I got to *The Post*, and there was a curfew. This is all in response to King's murder. My mother couldn't come to pick me because of the curfew. *The Post* was able to send us home in a cab. I went home and stayed over with a friend. She lived near 16th Street. That morning, when we woke up, we could hear the caissons coming up 16th Street. (This is the street that tees into the White House, thus 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.) They were coming in to quell the riot. That is quite a memory. Then, I took a cab home because things were calm enough for me to get a cab. So, I think there--I don't remember how long the curfew lasted. That 14th Street, where I went to shop, that street was torn down by the riots. It was a major black commercial district, not only in Washington, but in the whole country. That street was not restored until maybe ten years ago. It was interesting. It remained in shambles for years and years. That was my memory.

KR: We want to ask you a lot of questions about your Howard years. I just have a few more questions about your education and growing up.

CC: Okay.

KR: For the record, can you say the names of the parochial schools that you went to?

CC: I went to St. Gabriel's grade school and Immaculate Conception Academy for high school. I went to Howard University for college.

KR: How do you think going to parochial school shaped you?

CC: Well, I think they taught me how to value my mind. I guess I could have gotten this in public school too, but I feel that I developed a real love of learning from my Catholic school experience. When I went to high school we had nuns. It was interesting to have someone else value your mind and teaching you to value it. I learned to love literature. How did it shape me otherwise? It gave me a sense of integrity. I'm not Catholic now, nor would I ever be again. That went by the board when I was eighteen. Oh, God, I used to hate to go mass. Every Sunday, we had to go Mass. The other thing is it's instilled this sense in me that whatever I do is not good enough because in Catholicism you're always trying to achieve this state of grace. There's always so many ways that you can fall short. I still have that sense. But it also informs my poetry. I'm trying to think how. Well, it gives me a strong sense of metaphor and irony (e.g. the Immaculate Conception). Anyway, that's how it shaped me. I think it's why I became a lesbian, in a way.

KR: How so?

CC: Well, when I went to high school, all girls. Taught me to appreciate the company of women. That's why, I think, I'm a lesbian because I think you have to learn to appreciate the company of women. That's how I think Catholic school shaped me.

KR: Describe the application process to college.

CC: I filled it out, and I sent it in. I only applied to Howard. They put me on a waiting list. I told my mother. She talked to one of her friends in the city government. She had many. So, I got in. My grades weren't all that good.

KR: Did you take the SATs?

CC: Yes, yes, I did. I never did well on standardized tests. I also took the GREs [Graduate Record Examinations]. In fact--this is terrible to admit--I'm not going to admit it.

KR: Do you want me to turn the recorder off?

CC: No, no. Don't turn it off. I never did well on standardized tests. I went to Rutgers for graduate school in English from '69 to '74, and I got a master's. Initially, I was in a Ph.D. program. I wasn't ready for a Ph.D. program in English at a place like Rutgers, really, because their English Department was very crack. I was still reading primary texts. They were reading critics. I just got a master's and left. I came back in '91 because I did want a doctorate and I wanted it in English. Do you know Barry Qualls? No. He was head of the English Department then. He was an old friend. I said, "Look, I want to get back into the English Department." He said, "That will be great, Cheryl." He said, "Just apply." So, I applied. I got accepted. I didn't take a GRE. I wasn't going to. I told Barry. I said, "I'm not taking the GRE. If you can't let me in without that, then forget it." So, when the secretary called me and said, "Where's your GRE?" I said, "I'm not taking the GRE." She said, "Oh, we must have that." I said, "Well, you talk to Barry." She called me back, and she welcomed me into the English Department.

I loved it. I had the greatest time. I got my doctorate in '99, but those eight or nine years were really great. Students were great. Faculty was great. They knew something about black literature at that point. When I went in there before, nobody knew anything. You know you have to have a mentor in graduate school. You just can't go it alone. You need to have somebody who knows your work. Of course, nobody knew it. What did that mean? That meant I had to either not continue or choose something I didn't want. I had a great time the second time I went and I finished in '99.

KR: We will go in-depth into your years at Rutgers. If we could talk about Howard, we will ask you some questions about your Howard years.

CC: Okay.

KR: You talked about the professors that you studied under. Can you describe your course of study at Howard?

CC: Well, I majored in English. I minored in classics, which I enjoyed, classics in translation, of course. I also minored in journalism. That was okay. I enjoyed French. Well, I enjoyed all my lit courses. That was primarily my course of study. Well, I told you about that one survey course in what they called "Negro Literature in the U.S.," but I didn't take any other black lit courses because there were none. I took courses in black history in the U.S. and also African history from Chancellor Williams. What else? I took another African history course from this really silly Nigerian instructor who was more interested in hassling the women students. That was my major course of study, English.

KR: Did you commute?

CC: Yes. I didn't live on campus. I commuted. I took the bus. [It] wasn't that far from where we lived. Yes, I did.

JK: You mentioned Black Nationalism that was emerging at Howard at that time. What were the political debates that students were engaged in and the political issues they were organizing around?

CC: Well, whether we should support integration. Whether we should embrace white institutions. Violence versus nonviolence. Violence versus nonviolence. That was a big one. The role of women. As Aretha [Franklin] says, "Understand your man." Well, I definitely wasn't into that. I wasn't even a lesbian yet, but I wasn't into that. I'm trying to say something about sexuality because I remember that the editor of the school newspaper was a woman, a big nationalist--*Eyes on the Prize*, they have a segment on Howard. They interviewed her. Her name was Adrienne. Her last name might have been Brown. Well, I'm pretty sure she was a lesbian. We went to a party at her house. It was only one bed in the apartment. Actually, at that time, her roommate was a woman who became a prominent photographer, whose name is Leigh. She was beautiful. There was only one bed in there. So, I was standing next to this guy named Harry, who was crazy--Harry Quintana. He was crazy. I said, "There's only one bed in here." He said, "I don't care. I don't give a damn. I don't get into people's business." I learned from that, if people have the politics, so what of their sexuality. That wasn't the major feeling. I did learn from that. I learned not to meddle into people's business. I'm sure she was a lesbian, but nobody commented on that because her politics were so unquestionable in terms of issues emanating around Black Power and because of her voice on campus.

It was very interesting. All of the radicals had the newspaper, *The Hilltop*. The minute Black Power came in, the newspaper was radicalized. That never happened at Rutgers. The radicals never got control of the *Targum*. Never, never. If you wanted radicalism, you had to read the *Black Voice*. By the time I left in '13, that wasn't even radical. The radicals never got the means of communication at Rutgers, but they got all of them at

Howard. Maybe it was because it was a smaller place. There were only about twelve thousand people at Howard. Rutgers is vast.

In fact, there was another woman at Howard, Cynthia. She was an intellect. There were all of these people that didn't necessarily get involved in the activism, the marching or the demos [demonstrations], but all these little intellectuals that advised the movement people because they were really, really smart and they taught themselves a lot, learned a lot, knew a lot actually. Cynthia was one of these people, so was Paula Giddings. Do you know her, Paula? We were there at the same time. Paula was the editor of the literary magazine at that time. I knew Cynthia. She was from Plainfield, New Jersey. I come to Rutgers. I go to a gay liberation conference at Rutgers in '73. It was the Spring of '73. I go to this workshop on race and sexuality. There's old, white gay men. There were these three or four black women, black lesbians. Cynthia was one of them. I went up to her. I said, "You used to go to Howard, didn't you?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Were you out then?" She said, "I did my gay stuff at American University. I didn't do it at Howard." I said, "Wow." Then, interestingly enough, Cynthia became one of the first people that I knew as a transgender person because she changed her identity from female to male. She took a gender neutral name, but it all started with breast reduction. She had very big breasts. I remember she said, "Yes, I'm having breast reduction surgery. I don't care what anybody says." I said, "Go for it." She said she lost forty pounds with the breast reduction surgery. That's how big her breasts were. Then, she changed her gender. Cynthia, that's not her name. People tell me, "Don't call people by their dead names." Anyway, that was one experience of homosexuality, as it were, at Howard. Not much else. I didn't know any gay men. My sister, when she went four years later, she was in theater and all of her friends were gay men. All of her male friends were gay. She considers herself somebody who's raised by gay men. I didn't meet gay men really until I came to Rutgers and I got involved in the Gay Alliance there. Did you want to ask me something else?

JK: Yes. I have one more question about Howard. It is related to politics. Were there any speakers that came to campus? You mentioned professors that were influential.

CC: Yes, there were a lot. I was going to get to that when I got sidetracked. Yes, Howard had a big lecture series. [There were] a lot of lecturers. King even came there one time. I even saw him. I'm trying to think of who else. [There were] a lot of speakers. This white man from Alabama that was trying to run against George Wallace. I can't think of his name [Richmond Flowers, Sr.]. I think he had been an attorney general in Alabama. I can't think of his name. Of course, he didn't win, but he came to speak. He came to talk about how the South was changing. It was changing. It didn't stay changed long. They became Republicans, didn't they? Let me think of who else. I'm sure I'll have to think about it because I can't remember now.

JK: We can come back to this.

CC: Yes. I can remember speakers at Rutgers better because Rutgers had a lot too.

KR: What was going on at Howard in terms of the anti-war movement?

CC: Well, everybody that championed Black Power had an anti-war politics. As Stokely would say, "Why are we going over there to fight?" Well, he took the same position as Malcolm X. "To fight people of color, when they're kicking our asses over here in the U.S." That was the politics. Every time people rallied around or talked about Black Power, the issue of Vietnam would come up, the issue of divestment I think, the issue of corporate politics, whose interests were being served by our being in Vietnam. America is such an anti-Communist place. Still is. It's ridiculous. So ridiculous. Now, Russia's doing everything. We're back to that now. Russia's doing everything. A friend of mine said, "Why are we obsessing over a few smart Russians when twenty three million people voted for Trump?" I don't care if they were convinced on Facebook or not, they voted for that motherfucker. So, the students' position on Vietnam put Howard in a precarious place because of the amount of money it received from the Feds. Same thing that's at Rutgers--the amount of money you get from the state, federal government. Howard got about sixty percent of their money from the federal government. They didn't want to upset the Feds. Yes, upset the Feds, upset the committee that ruled on whether Howard got their money. Howard was placed in a rather--well, it felt itself in a rather precarious situation with the politics of the students. So, the anti-war position was bundled in with all those other Black Nationalist politics, or Black Power politics I should say, because not everybody was Nationalist.

KR: There was a massive student strike in March of 1968 at Howard.

CC: Yes.

KR: What do you recall of that?

CC: Yes, I do remember that. Yes, of course, I would have to. One of my close friends was very involved in it. Actually, we're still friends. I saw her a couple weeks ago, Angela Dews. Well, I remember the takeover. I wasn't part of it. I remember students being in the administration building. I remember some of their demands. One was they needed more study in Afro-American history and culture. That was a big demand. They demanded that the administration treat them better as students. The administration treated students like shit really--very disrespectfully. That's what I remember. How long did it last?

KR: It was March 19th to the 23rd.

CC: It wasn't that long. Because when I think of Rutgers anti-apartheid strike [in 1985], that was thirty days. That's all I remember about the 1968 strike.

KR: What did you think about the student demands about the curriculum being more reflective of black culture, black history? Did you think that was something that was justified?

CC: Yes, I do. I do. I do think that was justified. Yes, definitely. Definitely justified. Yes, we needed that. They needed to do that. I was only there for another year. Then, King was killed that year, too. We were just talking about that, what happened [in] D.C. when King was killed. I wasn't on campus as much as I might have been because I worked. I didn't have a lot of--I had maybe one close friend, maybe two, who were students at Howard.

KR: You worked for *The Washington Post*.

CC: Yes.

KR: Did *The Post* cover activism at Howard?

CC: Yes, they did. In fact, there was a man there, Ivan Brandon. He was a good friend of mine, too. He went to Howard. He wanted to be a reporter. They sent him as a stringer to cover. That's how he got his big break. Once he covered the strike at Howard or the Howard beat--because Howard was always in the news because of the strike and then King and then Stokely, so, yes, they did cover it. Yes, they did cover it. There were a lot of arguments at *The Post* among black reporters--I was in the newsroom. There was this bank of copy boys that sat adjacent to us. Most of them were black. Then, there were the few black reporters. So, we would get into arguments about the efficacy of our protest at Howard because they wanted a more moderate--they thought we should have a more moderate approach.

Then, the Poor People's Campaign--one jumped to that. That was still that same year. So, my sister got involved in that; my younger sister got involved in that. She brought people, activists from the Poor People's Campaign to *The Post* and to me, like I was supposed to give her entrée to the reporters. I said, "What are you doing here?" She had two or three people with her. She said, "I think we need to talk to somebody here at *The Post* about their story." I said, "Okay, whatever." I didn't say, "Whatever." We didn't say "Whatever." One of the reporters, who I hated--black--came over and he started talking to them. I can't remember what happened, but my sister went with her friends. So, that was the Poor People's Campaign. I forget what question we were on.

KR: I was asking if *The Post* covered the activism at Howard.

CC: Yes, it did. Most definitely. Most definitely.

KR: What was going on with the Black Arts Movement at Howard?

CC: Those were two other people who came as Black Arts people, Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones before he was Amiri Baraka. Well, the Black Arts Movement really affected my desire to write poetry. So, I started writing poetry--though that's not what you asked--started writing poetry at Howard because of that. There were always a lot of readings at Howard and off-campus. I went to a number of them and began to see the force of poetry, as well as theater. There was a lot of Black Theater at Howard and in the city, in

Washington. I remember being part of a writing workshop for about a year. I think I talked about it in that oral history [for the Queer Newark Oral History Project] I emailed to you the other day. So, ironically, not oddly--ironically, one of my white teachers started having workshop meetings at her house every weekend. She lived in Chevy Chase, [Maryland]. She had money but whatever. That workshop continued, and it included some faculty as well as other students. Actually, Paula Giddings was one of the people in the workshop. Do you know Sweet Honey in the Rock?

JK: Yes.

CC: They're more than a singing group, but Bernice Reagon's group--she's not with them anymore. One of the people that was in Sweet Honey in the Rock taught at Howard. Her name will come to me in a minute. Ysaye Barnwell, that was her name. She taught at Howard. I didn't have her. I didn't have courses from her. She taught composition and writing mostly. She was in the group, and she would sing and play guitar. It was an interesting little group. We continued to meet and by the end of that year--I guess it was the first semester of my senior year--we had a little conference where we met with publishers, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, then Random House, a couple of others. I can't remember. Toni Morrison was one of those people because she was at Random House then. That was before she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, her first book. What's that man's name that wrote--his name is Claude Brown and he wrote a groundbreaking memoir about growing up black in Harlem. It was before *Down these Mean Streets* [by Piri Thomas]. He came to encourage us to continue to write and try to publish. It was very interesting. Maybe we didn't get published, but a couple of people in that group, including one of my teachers, got jobs in publishing from that little meeting. By that time, I was already going to graduate school at Rutgers. I had already been accepted. So, I wasn't interested in publishing anymore--I mean, working in publishing. That was the effect of the Black Arts Movement in, once again, understanding cultural imperatives, understanding that there's a continuum of history, continuum of literature, continuum of culture, and that you somehow fit in it or you need to fit yourself into it.

KR: I wanted to ask you about your job in the Peace Corps. What did you do?

CC: I goofed off mostly. I typed. I didn't do much. I wasn't there that long. The office helped return volunteers. There were return volunteers working there in the office. Mainly, I typed. I didn't do much else. I didn't do much else [besides] goof off.

KR: How did the opportunity come about to get a job there?

CC: Well, the government had job openings in the summer. It started out as a summer job. I went there for an interview to the Peace Corps, and I got a job in that office. In fact, a friend of mine from high school was working there also. She put in a good word for me. I asked if they would continue my job into the school year, and they did, even though I goofed off. From there, I went to *The Post*.

KR: I wanted to ask you a pop culture question.

CC: What are you doing?

KR: It's a stress ball. My daughter makes them for me. Isn't it funny? Do you want to feel?

CC: That's nice. Are you stressed?

KR: No, it is my interview ball. My daughter calls them stress balls, though.

CC: She's ten?

KR: Yes, she's ten. From the time you were in high school, to the time you were at Howard, there were a lot of changes in the clothing that people wore, hair styles, music. Describe those changes and what you embraced.

CC: Actually, I was thinking about that recently, too. I'm a big R&B [rhythm and blues] fan. I still listen to it a lot. I've written poems about R&B. I loved the R&B singers, Sam Cooke, Clyde Mcphatter. Aretha came a little later. [I liked] all of the singing groups, like The Drifters. I wasn't so into The Temptations or The Four Tops. I did like The Supremes. I loved Stevie Wonder. I still love Stevie Wonder because he's brilliant, but I remember liking people like Ray Charles--not everybody liked him--always liking Ray Charles, even his country and western phase. I also got into jazz in college because everybody was into [John] Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders. I got into them, too, though I couldn't understand it.

I started wearing my hair natural, I think, in 1968. I know it was before I graduated from college. That really scandalized my mother. She couldn't take it. It just got to a point where I had to say to her, "Could we please have a conversation without it involving my hair? I'm really tired of this." She got back. She said, "I'm sorry." Then, I thought, "I wish I had done that sooner." I wish I had done that when I was about fifteen years old. It would have saved me at least seven years of nonsense. Anyway, I was still pretty much wearing skirts, yes, skirts and things like that. I didn't wear pants at all. That didn't start until I came to Rutgers, yes. That was another reason why I was glad I left D.C. I had to get away from that constraint, that middle-class constraint. I said, "Don't be expecting me to get married. I'm not getting married." "I understand that, Cheryl, and I tell people that." That was my mother. "I tell people that. I tell them you don't want to get married." I said, "Good." Anyway, that was then. I guess that was how pop culture affected me then. Of course, we didn't call it pop culture. We called it whatever. I would have regarded pop culture as mundane. Of course, I would have gravitated towards the jazz, which I didn't understand. You can't just listen to jazz and pretend you've got it. I should say that definitely Howard got me into studying Afro-American culture, black culture. It gave me an entrée into the study of it, even though graduate school--even though I could not hope to learn it in graduate school because people just weren't doing it then.

KR: You were in the Howard University Class of 1969. Of the women in your graduating class, were there many who went on to graduate school?

CC: I don't know. I really don't know. I know my friend Angie didn't. She never did. I'm trying to think. None of my close friends did. As I said, I didn't have that many friends at Howard. I didn't know people who did go on to graduate school, especially not in English. Rutgers was really recruiting blacks into its graduate departments. I can remember one of my teachers at Howard. He taught comparative lit. Angie and I ran into him on campus. He said, "What are you two going to do when you graduate?" I said, "Well, I'm going to graduate school in English." Angie said, "Well, I got a job at *Newsday*." That was a coup. He said, "I think you've made the wiser choice," and he pointed to me. If only he could see me four years later. No, I didn't make the wiser choice. But I can't remember. I really can't remember who went to graduate school.

KR: How did that recruitment work of black students to go to graduate school at Rutgers?

CC: Actually, this is again my mother. There was a list in *Ebony Magazine* of schools that were recruiting black students with fellowships, and Rutgers was one of them. She said, "You need to apply here." So, I did. I had just read an article by the man who was head of the English Department then, Richard Poirier. He's dead now, too, but he was famous then. That's how I applied. That's how I got in. I did take a GRE, but they didn't consider those. That didn't weigh as much as it might have. That was how that recruitment worked. I remember there were many of my friends--most of the black students in graduate school at Rutgers that I met at that time were in the education school. A close friend of mine was in sociology, Charly Flint. She hung in there. She got her doctorate. She was real smart. Most of them were in education. There was Charly in [sociology]. There was me in English. There was one other black man in my class in the English Department, Luther Brown. He had a big scholarship, not from Rutgers, but from one of the foundations. Just like with me, we were not prepared for the rigor of that English Department because they privileged critics. They were all talking critics. We were still talking primary texts. That was the English Department then. We were not prepared for that. Not at all. So, I don't know what Luther did. I know I saw him many years later in Washington. He came to visit me at my parents' house. He went into media, I later learned.

KR: We have been going for over two hours. Are you okay to keep going? Do you want a break?

CC: I think I better get some water.

KR: Sure. Let us pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: We are recording. We are on. What were your first impressions of Rutgers?

CC: That was for you to see. It's about Assata [Shakur]. [Editor's Note: Dr. Clarke shares with the interviewer Joseph Kaplan an article about Assata Shakur.]

I was able to get into the graduate dorm at [Rutgers]. It was on College Avenue. It was across the street from the Student Center on College Avenue. I don't know what's in there now, but it's not residence halls. I lived right on College Avenue. I had a great roommate. She was in Russian history. I was just thinking about her recently, too. We had a great time together for a year as roommates. She was really smart. She studied all the time, all the time. She was very smart, got very good grades. What was I doing? Well, I was studying sometimes.

My impressions of Rutgers was excitement because it was very different. God, I don't think I'd ever seen anything like it because you know it's so damn big. Black students were organizing and organized. I started to teach sooner than I should have. I got a job in 1970 with the Urban University Program under this woman Eleanor Ross, who's dead now. She was brilliant. I liked her a lot. I learned a lot from her. I taught this course called something like "Culture and Identity." I can't remember, but I know it had "Culture" in it. I had to teach writing. I had to teach writing to people like me, who were not prepared for Rutgers, except they were less prepared for Rutgers than I was for Rutgers. They were kids that had very poor educations and no preparation for college. They were channeled into this program which the EOP [Educational Opportunity Fund] Program is a descendent of. Now, the EOP program--people hated that program. Faculty hated that program. They badmouthed that program all the time. We were teaching these courses, hoping to develop kids toward college-level English courses. They were taking some courses for credit, but the courses they took with us, no credit, which was a bad idea, is a bad idea. That was really tough.

KR: Those students, after they finished the Urban University Program, which college at Rutgers were they going to?

CC: They would go to either Douglass, Rutgers or Livingston, yes, one of those three. They would go into one of those three if they could--well, they were already accepted in the university. It was not a problem of them being accepted into the university. They were already there, but did the colleges want to accept them? Well, I can't remember how it worked, honestly. Many went to Rutgers, and many went to Livingston. Many of them were not successful, but the program grew. Now, it's a very well-respected program. It has a large constituency of support at the state, among its alumni and among its students' parents. Nobody's going to mess with it now, but then it was definitely not appreciated.

KR: Why did Rutgers have this program?

CC: Because students had demonstrated and said, "You need to honor some of the black and Latino people who pay taxes. You need to do something to recruit more black and Latino students." They said it in Newark and they said in New Brunswick and they said

it in Camden. There were protests--this was before I came, this is something I read about I guess--all over the state for Rutgers to integrate. So, they developed the program I worked in. They talked to black people they knew at the state. They hired more black and Latino staff. They called upon the black staff that was already there to help with this project, to put their shoulders to the wheel. Mason Gross was president then. He was liberal. Then, after him was Ed Bloustein, who was very liberal. That's how these programs got started.

It was always a struggle as to whether they would be able to hang in the university, because of the attacks on the part of other academic departments, especially English. The reason the English Department has writing centers now is because of programs like EOP [Educational Opportunity Fund Program]. They realized that when you help black students, when you develop educational prerogatives for black students, you're also helping white students. I taught white students, too. I taught in that UUD program for two years, and then I taught in the English Department for two years, though I shouldn't have been teaching because I didn't know anything about teaching. White students couldn't write either. Then, I taught them again in the '90s when I taught Women's Studies, and they still couldn't write. It was worse. I stopped asking for papers, because I couldn't bear to read their writing. I gave them tests. I just gave them fill in the blanks and whatever else, midterm and final. I couldn't take their writing. Then, we have now--I think they still have them because one of my good friends used to run them--the Learning Resource Centers. They have them on all campuses, and students can go in and get help with their papers, all of their homework. Any kind of learning assistance to students was looked down upon when I first came to Rutgers.

KR: What was the English Department like in 1969 and the early '70s?

CC: Let me think if they had women. Yes, there was one woman. Bridget Lyons. Can I think of anybody else? There were no woman. I don't remember any. Oh, yes, Carol Smith and Alicia Ostriker.

KR: Cheryl, I will pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: We are back on.

CC: It was that orthodoxy I couldn't stand. I couldn't stand it when I first went to Rutgers, the nationalism. I didn't subscribe to it. Because I was a graduate student and because I had a job, I was a faculty person, the political student organizations respected me, sort of. I left Rutgers in 1973. Is that when I left? No, maybe 1974. I taught in the English Department from '72 to '74, then left Rutgers and I worked for Middlesex County for three years, which was good. I needed to do that. Then, I came back in '78 to go to the Social Work school.

Then, in '80, I started working in Student Affairs. That's where I had to work--we had to work with student organizations. The Students for an African Society (SAS) was the umbrella group for all the black organizations; they fell under SAS. Woe betide them if they went against the grain, any of the organizations or the leaders. We had to work with a lot of the groups, a lot of the student organizations, because we were assigned to work with them. We were assigned to give them their funds, their student organization funds. We were assigned to make sure they were doing what they were supposed to be doing, the programming they were supposed to be doing. What I'm talking about now, after 1980, is my second phase at Rutgers because I worked in student activities from '80 to '89. It almost killed me because there's so much night work. There's so much having to go to student programs at night. There's so much programming that you have to do as a Student Affairs person because we had to spend the funds. We had to do a lot of programs. It was hard work, nothing I would want to go back to. I did learn a lot from students and I learned that you really do work for students. It was better to deal with students out of the classroom than it was in the classroom for me anyway. I preferred that. Some of those students were quite brilliant. They could do so much. They could do so much, really, really good leaders.

KR: Who stands out in your mind?

CC: Actually, the students I worked with in the West Indian Students Organization, WISO. I don't remember their names. They were very good leaders because they didn't kowtow to Black Nationalism because they came from black countries, even though former European colonies. They didn't need to prove themselves as black. That was another thing. You had to prove that you were black. They didn't kowtow to that. In fact, they took a more global approach to things, global perspective. They were part of the movement on campus that made people aware of apartheid. They stand out. All men, of course. Then, the man--he hasn't been there in a long time--he was the chaplain at Rutgers. He had a student who he wanted to start doing some research on apartheid in South Africa. His name was Bruce. He wasn't affiliated with any student organization. I was trying to think of his last name. He was from Baltimore. It's funny I can remember all that. He actually started the anti-apartheid movement. He did a lot of research on apartheid in South Africa. Then, he helped bring in faculty at Rutgers who were anti-apartheid, were interested in getting something started on campus around apartheid. It was a two or three-year process of getting students organized to demand divestment, but Rutgers wasn't going to divest until the state did. It was an ongoing movement of students who demanded divestment, who demanded that we know something about South Africa, who organized faculty around the issues, who encouraged courses to be established. I'm trying to remember because I had forgotten about the anti-apartheid movement until you said something to me about it. I said, "Oh, God, oh, yes, that." Because I was working in student affairs, student activities, I had to really tread lightly because you couldn't be encouraging students to protest. We had to tread lightly in terms of our support. It was an interesting time.

KR: Earlier you mentioned the thirty-day protest. What happened?

CC: Well, students took over the Student Center [on] College Avenue for thirty days. Was I still working there in that building? I can't remember if I was still--what year was the thirty-day strike?

KR: 1985.

CC: Yes, I was. Students took over the Student Center for thirty days. The administration allowed them to. They didn't have the police come in and cart people out, as they have done. So, you just lived with it every day. They had it organized. They were sitting in. We were helping them as much as possible without seeming to help them because everybody was doing it. Universities in the whole country were doing it. So, the Bloustein Administration went along with it.

Christine Kelly is another student. She was in political science after she graduated from Rutgers, after she graduated from, I think, Rutgers College. She was a big activist in the anti-apartheid movement. She was a big activist, period. She was one of those really political students, I liked her a lot, she was a good leader, a good student, too.

Central America was a big thing, too. We had a big CISPES [Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador] group on campus at that time. They did a lot of organizing and education around Central America, especially Nicaragua, El Salvador too. I admired them. I can't remember their names. They stand out--Bruce and I can't remember his [last] name, and the students in the West Indian Students Organization. They graduated before the divestment movement. I think they were really instrumental in development of that [anti]-apartheid movement. I remember they came back during the demonstration, and they said, "Wow, look at this." I said, "But this is the movement that you helped to build." They hadn't thought of it that way because they had graduated. It hadn't happened before they graduated. They had created that momentum or what became that momentum.

KR: Ultimately, the anti-apartheid movement was successful. Why do you think it was successful?

CC: Well, I think, of course, it had an impact on the State of New Jersey. The state divested. When the state divested, Rutgers did. The unions divested. Well, the students were relentless, and they were well-educated. They knew a lot. They weren't bullshitting. They knew a lot. They could answer all those questions. They knew what was happening in Southern Africa or what was happening in Central America. They were very well informed and very political, yes. The administration knew they couldn't pull the wool over their students' eyes, as it were. They couldn't bullshit them. The administration then did not want to be characterized as aiding and abetting that horrific system over there, that horrific government, which remained horrific for a long time. It still is in some ways. It's not like the white people learned to love black people overnight.

I've been several times, but I was in the airport in, I think it was, Johannesburg. I was getting some candy in a candy shop there. I was standing behind this white woman. She was demanding that the salesperson wait on her, in not a very nice way. Then, she got out of line and went back into the store, not that the salesperson was so nice either. I said. "Could I pay for this?" She pops back in the line and says, "Just a minute, you can't go in front of me." I said, "Lady, look, you got out of line. I've got one thing and I'm going to get it." I felt like saying, "Fuck you." It was that attitude. She was an Afrikaner. It was that attitude, "You can't go ahead of me." She's in the back of the store coming back. "You can't go ahead of me." It was like right back to Washington, D.C. Very interesting. What topic were we on?

KR: I would like to go back to your first phase at Rutgers if that is okay.

CC: Okay.

KR: We left off, and you were talking about the makeup of the English Department. You had thought of the two women professors that there were.

CC: There were three, yes, Bridget Lyons, Carol Smith and Alicia Ostriker--all in the graduate department. In 1972, Cheryl Wall came. She was one of the first black faculty persons they hired. Then, Donald Gibson, I think he came as well at that same time. Kate Ellis came around that time. By that time, I was getting ready to leave. I had finished my coursework, and I was just getting ready to get the master's and go. There were plenty of women in the English Department at Douglass College. [There was] one really old woman, whose name I can't remember. She taught "19th Century British Novels." I can't remember her name. She was about to retire. She smoked cigarettes. Well, everybody smoked cigarettes then. Everybody smoked in class. It was amazing. You'd just light up a cigarette and smoke, ashes on the floor. Faculty too. It was amazing. They were all male. I can't remember any women, except the ones I said. Carol Smith taught the modernists, Bridget Lyons taught Renaissance poetry, and Alicia Ostriker taught poetry. That was it.

KR: What did you get your master's degree in?

CC: English. A master's, all you had to do was answer a bunch of questions. You had a little committee. They set up your questions. You said what you wanted to be questioned on, and you studied for it. Then, you went in there and you answered their questions and then they signed off on your degree. It wasn't really set up for people who wanted master's. It was set up to proceed on through to the Ph.D. Yes, it was in English.

KR: I wanted to ask about the Black Arts Movement that was going on at Rutgers University, especially with women.

CC: There were some Black Arts people at Livingston. Nikki Giovanni was there. Sonia Sanchez was there for a very brief time. Toni Cade Bambara was there for not so long. They were very influential with the students. I got to know Toni Cade, and I liked

her very much. She was very smart. Nikki Giovanni, I didn't feel the same way about. I still can't stand her. Somebody contacted me not long ago and asked me if I would come to Virginia because she teaches at [Virginia Tech], if I would come and be on a panel to honor Nikki. I said, "You're asking the wrong person because I don't think I should come because I'm not a big fan of Nikki Giovanni." "I didn't know that." "Well, that's all right." That's about as much as I know of the situation with women. As I said, they were very influential with the students. Well, Nikki and Toni [were]. Sonia didn't stay too long because--and she told me this--she felt that a couple of the leaders, black student leaders, threatened her. She had two young kids who were twins. One of the guys said something about her kids. This is what she told me. This is why she left Livingston, because she felt threatened. This was part of that orthodoxy, "If you don't go along with me, well …"

KR: Right.

CC: I wish I could remember better, but I can't. I can't remember the Black Arts Movement there right now. I'm sure there was one. Well, what do you know about it?

KR: Basically, what you said is what I know. I do not know much else about it. I know that there were some notable professors at Livingston College.

CC: Yes. Jan Carew. He was from Guyana. He was very notable. He's dead now too. People loved him. Students loved him. He was very influential, very political. He didn't stay at Rutgers long. What's his name who died recently? Not all that recently. I think he died. He was in Sociology, I think. It'll come back to me. He was there. Let's see who else. Marc Crawford, who had been a journalist with Johnson Publications, M-A-R-C Crawford. He's dead now too. This man who wrote a book on the Panthers, *A Special Rage*, Gil--I can't remember his last name. [Editor's Note: Gilbert Stuart Moore wrote *A Special Rage*, published in 1971.] He was there very briefly. That's all I can remember right now.

KR: Livingston College got a reputation as being a failed experiment, as being a center of drug use on campus.

CC: Really? Go on.

KR: Where and why do you think Livingston got that reputation?

KR: Well, because a lot of black people went there. Wherever black people are, there's drugs and carrying on. I think it got that reputation undeservedly. I'm sure there was no more drug use at Livingston than there was a Rutgers College. I worked at Rutgers College for many years. I don't think it was a failed experiment because I think--well, it was supposed to expose its students to radical alternatives in higher education or whatever. A lot of the people who were there in the beginning were radical, scholars and all. I think Livingston radicalized the rest of Rutgers, if I may be so bold as to say so, because when they got rid of the college system--well, even before then, each college

used to have its own administration, its own graduation. Then, they centralized and saw a lot of the Livingston faculty, like all of the other faculty went all over the university. So, I think in that way, Livingston horizontally affected all of the university. But I think they just said that because a large number of black people went to Livingston.

I worked at Livingston the last three years of my career. It was a very changed place by that time. As I said, the college system was gone. Actually, they still had their honors programs, each of the colleges. They're not really colleges now. They're administrative locations. They still had their honors programs. I remember one of the deans asked me to work with this kid, who had written a novel because Livingston, being nontraditional--that was the word they used, nontraditional. They didn't say radical. Nontraditional. They were letting him write a novel. He asked me to work with him. I said, "Oh, sure," and I did. That was nontraditional. He was a very smart kid. He was going to go to medical school. He was at Livingston. He was very smart. A lot of smart kids. They were all over the university. Please, Livingston, there were some assholes there in the beginning. Actually, they got rid of all the assholes. They did. By 1980, all the assholes were gone. The black assholes and the white assholes, they were gone.

KR: Do you want to do more question and then take a break for lunch? Is that good?

CC: Sure.

KR: I am wondering about student activism in 1969-1970 and what you remember.

CC: I remember that there was a lot of it. There was anti-war. There was women's and there was gay. That was the first time I came in contact with gay people as political people. The organizations, the activists worked together. Even the black activists worked with the white student activists. This was the first time I saw gay activists. They were male. There was one, his name was Lionel Cuffie. He was very involved. He and several others--I don't want to say it was just him--but they founded the Gay Student Alliance. I remember that there was a strike at least once a week at Rutgers when I started there in 1969-1970. There was a lot of political activity. [Editor's Note: In 1969, the Student Homophile League (SHL) was founded at Rutgers by sophomore Lionel Cuffie. Later, this organization became known as the Rutgers Gay Alliance, then as the Bisexual, Lesbian and Gay Alliance of Rutgers University (BIGLARU), and now is the Queer Student Alliance (QSA).]

KR: What do you remember about the national strike? It was 1970, after the United States invaded Cambodia. It was nationwide. That's when the students were killed at Kent State and Jackson State. What do you remember about that at Rutgers? [Editor's Note: On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guardsmen fired upon students at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine others. Some of the students had been protesting the United States' entry into Cambodia, while others had been passing nearby or observing the demonstration. On May 14 and 15, 1970, students at Jackson State College protesting against racial harassment were fired upon by state and city police, resulting in two deaths and a dozen injuries.]

CC: Nothing really. Isn't that strange? I'll just say nothing. I can remember speaking at some kind of program that was featuring people to talk about Cambodia, the escalation in Cambodia. I remember that I was speaking with two friends. One was an Ethiopian and the other one, he was from New Jersey. The three of us, I don't know what we were calling ourselves, but we got up there on the stage to speak. I remember I froze because I didn't know anything about anything really. I was just hanging out with those two, trying to act political. That's about as much as I remember. That's about as much. Of course, I remember Kent State. Of course, I remember Jackson State, but not Rutgers' reaction to it, not the national strike.

KR: Did you have any friends, distant family members, people you knew in the community who served in the Vietnam War?

CC: This boy I worked with as a volunteer. I did volunteer work for the Red Cross, candy striping, except we didn't call ourselves that. I did that for like four or five summers. My last summer there I was working with this young man. He was older than I was, a couple of years. He went into the service. He was the first person I knew to be killed in Vietnam. I remember that because there was an obituary in *The Washington Post*. I can't remember his [name]. It will come back to me. He was the first person I knew to be killed in Vietnam. I'm trying to think. I know now my close friend James Credle, who used to work at Rutgers-Newark, he's a Vietnam vet. He was a medic in Vietnam. I'm trying to think. My friend Angela from Howard, her father was in Vietnam. He was in the service. They were an Army family. Her father was deployed to Vietnam. He was in his forties. He was a colonel. He had to go over there. I'm trying to think who else did I know? Like everything else, it will come to me.

KR: Definitely.

CC: Did you know anyone in Vietnam?

KR: My dad was in the service. He was in the Navy and served on a destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin. He recently told me about one of his high school classmates who was killed in Vietnam.

CC: Just thought of somebody else, this man I used to work with. Rutgers used to have a branch in Jersey City, a night school branch. I taught there for a number of years. I still didn't have any business teaching because I didn't know anything, but I was teaching anyway. He was an administrator there with the Equal Opportunity [Fund] Program--you know how they have it on all campuses. I would ride home [with him] because he lived in New Brunswick. We would ride home together. I would ride with him. He had flown over two hundred missions in Vietnam. I was telling my mother. She said, "He's still alive?" I said, "Yes, he's still alive." What was his name? He was really cute. He used to cheat on his wife like crazy. No, he did. I didn't have anything to do with it. He didn't cheat on her with me. He flew about two hundred missions in Vietnam. His big dream was--he had been laid off from an airline, so he wanted to get back to flying because he

loved to fly. What was his name? I liked him, too. That was him. When we got back to New Brunswick, we would sit in his car and smoke reefer. That was my downfall, marijuana. Still is. I'm sure some others will come to mind.

KR: Do you want to pause and take a lunch break? Is this a good time for you?

CC: Sure, if you want to.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: We are back on the record.

JK: We were talking about the anti-apartheid movement a while ago. Just from your recollections, I wanted to see if you remember any conflicts between black and white activists in the movement on campus and whether or not that was an issue that you saw at the time.

CC: I don't remember that as much as I do--I don't remember conflict between black activists and white activists. What I do remember is that the anti-apartheid movement was multiracial. Then I remember--I have to be careful how I say this--one [black activist] in particular, whom I hate, assuming leadership when they hadn't done any of the work to develop the movement, the anti-apartheid movement on campus. I remember--there was more than one--one woman who was a very good speaker, also very bright, very nationalist, speaking as if she was--she was making a speech at an event and actually, it was on the Livingston Campus, I think. I guess I should say "we," but I wasn't on the program; I was in the audience. She assumed leadership over all the work that all the other student organizations had done to bring the movement to fruition, as it were. That's what I remember. I wanted to ask, "Well, where the hell were you when people were really starting on the ground with this whole movement on campus? You weren't there." I remember that. I don't remember so much about antagonism or conflict between black students and white students.

JK: To jump back a bit, you were heavily involved in the activism around Assata Shakur on campus and in the New Brunswick community. How did you hear about Assata Shakur and her trial?

CC: Newspaper. It was a big deal when they had the so-called "shoot out" at Exit 9. We found out that she was in jail in New Brunswick after she recovered from her gunshot wound. The activists from New York were coming to New Brunswick. That was another thing we did. We had to trial watch. We had to go to court almost every day. Anyway, this woman, Frieda Grier, whose name is on that list, said, "Look, we need to show some solidarity with this sister. It's happening in our own backyard. Let's find out what we can do." Some of the activists, the defense committee, came to New Brunswick and talked to us. It was five or six of us. Two of them were students. One of them was that woman Domine Pittman, Frieda Grier, me, and Marge Woods. So, we really considered ourselves in the community, not so much at Rutgers because I was working

for the county then. I had left Rutgers, worked for the county until '77 or '78, from '74 to '78. I did a lot of Xeroxing for Assata on the county's dime. So, we started going to the court because that was part of the tactic, go to the court, fill the courtroom so they'll see that we're watching. That's what we did.

JK: What were some of the tactics that the defense committee employed? There were things written in the papers, in the New Brunswick *Daily Home News* and also in the Rutgers papers. Do you know of any other mediums? Was there tabling done on campus, things like that, that the committee was engaged in?

CC: There might have been. I'm not sure. I can't remember. There might have been tabling, but, remember, I wasn't on campus then.

JK: Right. Thinking about the high stakes that were involved in this case, do you know of and did you experience any repression?

CC: Yes, absolutely, yes. That's another reason I said I wouldn't be involved in single issue politics like that again. Yes, absolutely. I had to deal with the FBI for at least three years after Assata went to jail and especially after she escaped. One time, I was at a picnic or a party in Johnson Park. You know that part of that park that goes into Piscataway? Anyway, we were there, a whole bunch of us. It was during the Assata years. Several of the people that were at the party were stopped by the police. It was just harassment. I wasn't one of them because I wasn't driving, but the FBI came to where I lived in New Brunswick one time. They identified themselves. They said they wanted to talk to me. I said, "Well, I don't want to talk to you and I don't have to, and I'm not talking to you." They said, "Well, if you had a lawyer present, would you talk to us?" I said, "No, I'm not talking to you." That was the first time. I think it was the first time they confronted me. Then, when I moved to Highland Park, they followed and stopped the mother of the woman I was living with, just fucking harassing. Of course, she was horrified. I'm trying to think of--then, there was the stuff with the phones, the clicking every time you got a [call]. There was some degree of following, but I didn't drive a car, so they couldn't follow me. Yes, absolutely. I'm trying to think of--I told the people I worked with, I said, "Look, the FBI has been hassling me and they might come here. They might ask you questions about me. I'm just letting you know. You answer the questions the way you want to, but they're hassling me." They were okay about it. Yes, definitely. In fact, they even went to my parents' house in D.C. My mother told me. Of course, she would tell me. She said, "The FBI came here." I said, "Yes, I know. They've been everywhere." She went on about how she told them that she was a taxpayer and they didn't have any right to be questioning her loyalty. I said, "No, you don't even have to go that far. All you've got to say to them is, 'I will not speak to you without an attorney present.' You don't have to say anything else." She had to let them know about her paying her taxes and all that. That was her. They were asking her questions about me, both of them. My father was answering the questions because well, whatever. He didn't know anything. He just knew I worked in New Brunswick.

JK: When was this? Was this before she had escaped [from prison] or was this when she was on trial?

CC: Actually, now that you bring that up, it really heated up after she escaped because they were trying to pin it on somebody. Actually, it was after, after she escaped.

JK: I really wanted to ask that question, so I'm glad we got to talk about that. Going back to the activism around her case--we talked about this a little before the interview--what was the composition of both the New Brunswick community for defense and general protests demographically, black, white, Latino, and also sexual orientation? How did that factor into activist groups?

CC: Many of the activists were white. Many of them were old line radicals, people who have been doing activism around a range of issues for a long time. That was in New York. I would say it was mostly white women in the defense committee. I remember one woman had even been to jail. She had served some time for--I'm not quite sure what. Most of the black people involved with the committee, to my memory, were men, except this woman Martha Pitts [and] Afeni Shakur. Those were the only women. Evelyn Williams, she was her lawyer. She was involved. Those are the only women I really remember, only black women I really remember. I do not remember any Latinos. Actually, two friends of mine joined the committee. They started coming to court and being involved. They were lesbians. Martha, this crazy black woman I told you [about], she recruited them. They got interested because she had done a program at what used to be a lesbian center on Seventh Avenue South in the city. I don't know how she got there, but she would go a lot of places and develop support for Assata. So, it was those two, Susan and Maricla. I can remember Susan's last name. Actually, she went to Rutgers. She was in sociology at Rutgers, Susan Cavin [GSNB '73]. I don't remember anybody. There did not seem to be any gay men involved, unless they were in the closet, some of those nationalists. I think one of them recently died, one of the men who was involved. What was his name? He was a Shakur, too.

JK: Mutulu?

CC: Mutulu. Right. He was in jail, wasn't he?

JK: Part of the Brinks case.

CC: Yes.

JK: With Marilyn Buck.

CC: He was always around during Assata's time, Mutulu, yes.

JK: My last question. You are an expert on Audre Lorde. She has a poem "For Assata" in "The Black Unicorn." I'm wondering what it is about Assata Shakur that makes her a symbol for black lesbian feminism specifically, or her poetry. What makes her a muse?

CC: Yes, because she is, isn't she? Well, aside from Angela Davis, Assata was really the only revolutionary black woman who lived to tell about it. She escaped. That made her a muse for poets. Yes. I don't know if Audre ever met her because Audre was another person that got involved. She would come and she came to New Brunswick to do a reading one time for Assata. Maybe two people came. She came all the--well, I say "all the way"--she came from Staten Island. That's not so far from New Brunswick, once you get on that--what's its name would come across [Interstate 287] and get on Exit 13. It's not that far. She said, "Oh, it's not that far." She and her partner came. She didn't care that there wasn't anybody there. We would do parties for Assata and we would collect money for her defense. I'm trying to think of what else we might have done. Well, we got Jayne Cortez and Audre Lorde involved. There was another woman who got involved with us. Her name was Hattie Gossett. She taught at Livingston for a while. She didn't get tenure, so she didn't stay. Jayne Cortez was also at Livingston, and Audre participated in a reading for Assata in New York somewhere. I'm trying to think--I can't remember where. That's what I remember about the composition of the various groups, who were in support. I don't know. We were trying to answer why is she a muse. I think that's why. I remember this woman. I think she was writing a book, and Assata was one of the people that she was interested in. She was wondering the same thing: "Why is she so important to people like Audre or even you because I see that you are involved because I saw your name on…" I said, "Yes, I was." She said, "Well, why? What is her work?" I said, "Well, she's a symbol for people. She's a symbol of radicalism for people, and because she got away. That's her work. That's her work." I wouldn't want it. No, no, I wouldn't. To have to be constantly looking over your shoulder, which is how she lives.

JK: You visited her in prison.

CC: Not in Cuba. [laughter]

JK: Not in Cuba. [laughter]

CC: I'm not saying that I wouldn't if I went to Cuba, but I've never been there. I'd like to go though, I think.

JK: It's great.

CC: You've been?

JK: Yes.

CC: Did you visit Assata?

JK: No. [laughter]

CC: A lot of people do though.

JK: Yes, people do.

CC: A lot of people do. Good questions.

KR: Staying in this time period, you said you worked for Middlesex County from 1974 to 1978.

CC: Yes.

KR: What were you doing?

CC: Well, I worked in the Comprehensive Education and Training program, which was a federal government jobs program that was instituted during the Nixon Administration. A large program was developed in Middlesex County. New Brunswick, being the hub of Middlesex, the main office was there. There was an office in Jamesburg and there was an office in Perth Amboy. I worked in the New Brunswick office. I started off developing programs for people who wanted to go to college, so we developed a program in Middlesex County College. We worked to get people into some of those courses. That was what I did initially. I would work with the people at Middlesex to set these people up in these courses. We also worked with GED [General Educational Development] programs because many of the people had to get their GEDs. Then, we would try to get them into these college courses.

Then, unfortunately, I got promoted. I had to supervise twenty-nine people, which I swore I would never do again in life and I didn't. I was in charge of the intake process in New Brunswick, Perth Amboy and Jamesburg. I still wasn't driving, so I could rarely get to the other sites, but we had to intake people and test them to see what kind of program they would be best suited for. Could they go right into a jobs programs, job training, or did they need to get a GED? This was a long time ago. These were the things I did. I did that for about a year and a half. Then, I came back to school. I came back to Rutgers. Twenty-nine people is a lot to supervise.

KR: When you went back for your master's in social work, what were you thinking about doing at that point?

CC: Don't ask me. I don't know. I was actually working with a friend of mine. We were doing, what we would call now, diversity training. You know like they want to do with men around sexual assault now, training them not to be sexual assaulters? Well, we did race relations trainings with managers in New Jersey Bell Telephone. That was before it broke up, before--what do you call it--when AT&T could no longer be a monopoly and they had to allow other operators to come in. We did diversity-type training--that's what they call it now--with managers in New Jersey Bell, so that they could better work with their black and Latino employees and so they would hire more. I thought, "Okay, well, I'll get an MSW [Master of Social Work]. That will qualify me more to do the training and consulting," because that's a big part of social work too,

especially the training. That's what I thought I was going to do. I was going to come out and be a trainer and a consultant. Well, obviously, I didn't do that. That was just as well because I had to do so much training and I hate training. I hate teaching, too. I don't need to be doing anything like that because I can't stand to be questioned. You have to be ready to be questioned if you're going to be a supervisor, teacher, or a trainer. I especially couldn't stand the heat as a trainer. At the time I went into student affairs at Rutgers, that's all they did was training. Training, training, training. I had to get with it, but I hated it. It was a lot of work for so little time.

KR: When you went back to Rutgers, you were working as Assistant Coordinator in Student Activities.

CC: Not until after I got my social work degree. That was 1980 or '81.

KR: Were you teaching classes?

CC: I had taught a couple of times. I taught a course in Africana studies, which I really liked. I didn't really start teaching routinely again until the '90s when I began to teach women's studies courses. I taught "Women, Culture and Society" for a number of years. Then, for quite a while, I taught this graduate course in women's studies, for quite a while, as a matter of fact, from 2001 until 2010. That was okay. It made me nervous, but it was a little bit better because they were graduate students. You know how you do with graduate students, you make them teach themselves. "All right. Okay. Papers. All right." No tests. There is teaching that goes on in graduate school. It's just more subtle. I taught, but I didn't like it.

KR: I wanted to ask you about your poetry. If you could tell us when you started publishing, what you were publishing.

CC: I would say the first thing I ever published was--well, not ever, but the first, I guess, serious poem I published was in 1977 or '78 in this local lesbian journal called *Lady-Unique-Inclination-of-the-Night*. That was the first thing I published. Then, I published in a book called *Lesbian Poetry*, which I think came out in '81. That was poetry. In 1982, I published this article that became famous called "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance." That wasn't a poem, but "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance." People still read that. I just had a request two days ago for permission to put that article in a course pack and what do I want to charge for it. I'm serious. I've gotten as much as two thousand dollars for that article. People still want to do it. It was for a rich little college, so I charged them a lot of money. That was in the early '80s. I published my first book in 1982. That was called *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women.* Then, in 1986, I published *Living as a Lesbian*. That's my bestseller. That was for Firebrand Books, which began in the '70s and was a lesbian press in Ithaca. I forgot to say that Kitchen Table Press published my first book. That was [Kitchen Table]: Women of Color Press. Then, again, in 1989, I published my third book, which was called *Humid Pitch*. Then, in 1993, the same press, I published a book of poetry called *Experimental Love*. Then, I didn't publish a book of poetry again until 2016. All the while, I was

publishing in certain publications, anthologies. I've continued to do that. Just this year, I published a chapbook called *Targets*. I'll give each of you a copy.

KR: You also were an editor and contributing writer for *Conditions*.

CC: Oh, yes. How could I forget that? Nine years. That was great. Have you ever seen *Conditions*?

KR: No.

CC: I'll bring down a copy. It was an annual. It was like a journal. We published a lot of people. It was run by a collective. I did the grant writing. We got money from the New York State Council on the Arts and other sources, but not many. We had an office in Brooklyn. It would be about seven or eight of us and we would put the magazine out. It was more like an anthology. I'll show you a copy of it. In fact, I kept it in storage for like a thousand years--not a thousand years--but from 1991 until maybe 2012. This woman, her name was Julie Enszer. She's an editor and a publisher. She believes in keeping lesbian voices alive. She helped me get it out of storage and then she helped me pack them up. She took them and she got them out to many libraries throughout the country. Now, that's a lot of energy, which I didn't have. That was *Conditions*.

KR: You told us about this article that people are still reading. What are one or several of your poems that you think people will still be reading in a hundred years?

CC: [laughter] Well, there's one. It's called "Of Althea and Flaxie." It's a narrative poem about two black lesbians. Other than that, I don't know. They could possibly still be reading "Living as a Lesbian," because "lesbian" [is] in the title, a hundred years from now. I don't know if they would specifically remember any poems from it. I almost don't remember any poems from it, but I think it's a good book.

KR: When did you write "Of Althea and Flaxie?"

CC: 1978.

KR: Who was your inspiration for writing that?

CC: Well, I was putting together this book of my narrative poems, and I realized I didn't have anything on lesbianism in it. So, I had seen a picture, a World War II picture, of this black woman with a welder's helmet on. You know how women were in the trades then or got into the trades during World War II. It gave me an idea. I started off my poem, "Althea was a welder. Very dark, very butch," and whatever else, just went on like that. Sometimes poems write themselves.

KR: Did it write itself?

CC: Sort of, yes.

KR: For the record, can you say how it ends?

CC: Yes. Well, one of them dies in the end. I can't remember whether it's Flaxie or Althea. That's terrible. If you want me to read it, I'll read it to you.

KR: I read it.

CC: You read it, so you know it.

KR: I like the ending. It is the ultimate victory of what she gets to wear.

CC: Yes, right.

KR: That is why I wanted you to say it.

CC: Right, right. So, I guess it's Althea who dies in the end. It's a shame when you can't remember your own poetry. Yes. I think it would be that one, which I don't usually read anymore, unless I'm doing some kind of chronological reading.

KR: Are you still writing poetry?

CC: Yes.

KR: What is your process?

CC: Usually, I'm developing a book when--well, I guess most people are, but that doesn't necessarily have to be the case. I'm thinking of a book and I'm thinking of the themes that would draw a book together. That's my process. I am inspired--I guess I can use that word--by events a lot. Well, ironies like--I'm working on a poem now. I guess I'm working on it. I better get back to work--about selling our house the same week Aretha Franklin dies. So, both of those losses. It's seemingly divergent issues that inspire me. I don't write every day. Often, I'm exchanging poems with another poet. I do that with a woman, a poet, I've done it with for quite a while. So, we exchange poems weekly. That keeps you at least writing one poem a week. I'm always looking for a publisher. That's the poetry.

KR: Do you write your poems out by hand or do you type them, when you are initially writing them?

CC: Both. I like the physical act of writing, so I will write them out by hand a lot. Then, I get bored with writing because you get on the computer and you can change something right away, the ideas come quickly on the computer, which I like. I wouldn't dream of writing anything but poetry out. Prose, immediately to the computer, unless I'm somewhere where there isn't one.

KR: I was wondering if you could trace your lesbian feminist activism over the years.

CC: Oh, goodness. I came out in '73. I got involved with the social scene in New York. Then, got involved with the Assata Shakur case for three years. One very key thing for me was in 1975 I went to a socialist feminist conference at Antioch, the school. I met Barbara Smith, who is a big black lesbian feminist. By that, I mean famous. We met and we corresponded. We stayed in touch. She developed a series of black feminist retreats, which I went to and met other black feminists because it seemed that--well, not "it seemed"--it was that there was no such--black feminists didn't know each other. So, we met and did a lot of talking. Actually, Audre Lorde was in that group for a little while. She felt that we distanced ourselves from her because she was older. She was in her forties and we were in our thirties. I don't think that was the case, but, anyway, that's how she felt. That was a big part of developing my lesbian feminist political consciousness, realizing the importance of feminism.

Because of that contact with Barbara, because I was in New Jersey, she recommended me to be on the *Conditions* collective, which I started in 1983, I think. I think it was '83. No, it was '81, 1981. I worked with *Conditions* until 1990 and that was practically around the clock. There was a lot of work. Monthly meetings. Sometimes more than monthly. I had to go over to Brooklyn. That's when I learned to hate driving to Brooklyn. By that time, I was driving, which was good because I didn't get a license until 1981. Frankly, I shouldn't have one now because up here, New York, they are on your ass like white on rice. I have paid so much money to the State of New York for speeding, but they are on your ass. On the Turnpike, it's no big thing to go fifteen miles over. Don't try it up here. That was until 1990.

Also by that time, I was beginning to get promotions at work. So, by 1992, I got that directorship of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian and Gay Concerns. I did that for seventeen years. At Rutgers, you can't do just one thing. You've got to do a million and one other things. So, I also had to do services, accommodations to students with disabilities. That almost killed me. That is so complex and I didn't have any background in it. The people I had to work with tried to have no respect for me, but they didn't get far. But, I didn't know anything. It was a hard learning curve because they are the students wanting their accommodations. So, I did that disabilities for ten of seventeen years.

KR: That was a new office.

CC: I was the founding director.

KR: In that position, what achievements were made in the first five years that you were there, during the mid-1990s?

CC: At least every year we had an opening reception for LGBT students and student leaders and anybody else who wanted to come in, show their support for LGBT students. We had a New Brunswick-wide committee of faculty and staff--we called them liaisons--

in as many departments as we could who would be support persons for LGBT students--well, lesbian, gay, bi students. Then, we added [transgender]. This effort for an office started actually very importantly in [1988] with the campus-wide study on Lesbian and Gay Concerns. So, establishing an office was one of the recommendations. I was on that committee. I was out and I had been doing programming on LGBT issues since maybe '88 as an assistant dean. So, having this committee of liaisons was very important--and we would identify them. So, everybody had to be "out" as a support person for LGBT students. Theoretically, if students ran into any problems in that particular department or division, there were these liaisons who they could go to, to say, "Look, this is happening to me." [Editor's Note: In 1988, President Edward Bloustein established the President's Select Committee for Lesbian-Gay Concerns.]

What else did we do? We established publications, a guidebook every year. I say "we" because I worked with a lot of people, not staff, but other people in the university committee. We would do trainings three or four times a year on issues related to LGBT students. Many times I would get guests to come in, so I wouldn't have to do training. The people on the committee would come to the trainings. I guess I would say in the first five years, a lot more education had happened and a lot more acceptance. Yes, a lot more acceptance of sexual choice in terms of students.

KR: In 2000 through 2009, what institutional changes were made by your office to ensure equity for LGBT students?

CC: Well, we already had, and had for a long time, the university's non-discrimination policy. We were always falling back on that. Let me see. I also coordinated a bias prevention program. Students who encountered bias for any reason would come to that committee and report incidents, so many times LGBT students would report incidents that they had to deal with. I don't know really if we established any greater equity for LGBT students at Rutgers. We established greater knowledge, greater acceptance. They weren't harassed in residence halls like they used to be. They had more recourse to deal with inequities, but I don't know if we established any more equity for LGBT students through that office. I really don't. [Editor's Note: The University's non-discrimination policy was amended in 1981 to include sexual orientation and in 1996 to include sexual identity and expression.]

KR: What changes were made in things like housing, the way diplomas were given out?

CC: Diplomas?

KR: For example, Douglass commuting diplomas for transgender students who had transitioned.

CC: You see, this is the issue. The end of my tenure--I didn't do much for transgender students, well, we did some stuff around bathrooms--I was at the end of my tenure when a new director came in and she focused a lot, more than I did, on transgender student needs. I didn't get into anything about the diplomas. So, no, I didn't. I didn't. The

university was just beginning to have to do stuff for transgender students. Actually, the students demanded that.

KR: I was wondering if you could speak to the how the Office of LGBT Concerns worked with student groups on campus.

CC: Well, we involved students in our trainings. They were involved on our committees. We did programming together sometimes. I saw my job in that office as pushing others to do stuff for students, pushing residence life to get its stuff together about roommates and about harassment. I saw myself as pushing housing to be more equitable about who they let live together in their residence halls. So, I really saw myself as getting other people to do stuff. That's why we had liaisons and that's why we had that campus-wide committee, so we could push out and get other people to do work because I didn't have a large budget. It was me and my secretary. So, I couldn't demand--well, I could demand, but there was only so far I could go.

KR: When you became Dean of Students on Livingston campus, what did your job entail?

CC: Mostly advising students who needed help withdrawing from school or coming back to school after an illness or mostly students' personal needs. That was mainly what I did--seeing students in any kind of trouble, sometimes seeing their parents. If a parent died, what was our responsibility to the student? How could we make sure that his/her schooling didn't suffer? Also, dealing with faculty when students were ill. That was a lot of what we did. It wasn't like the glamorous days of the deans of students. Not a large budget. I hadn't been doing LGBT in a while, which was good, but I continued to do bias prevention. People would still come to me and report bias incidents.

KR: On that topic, there was a controversy in the English Department a couple of years ago with a graduate student, something about a movie. Some people were invited. I heard that you went into the English Department after that and you did bias training.

CC: I know. Yes, I did, yes. That was a strange incident. It was a strange incident. I could never get it straight. I could never really understand what really happened, except--what had the professor done? He showed a film. What?

KR: Yes. The professor showed a film and then a graduate student showed another film, but only invited certain grad students. It was done in a racist manner.

CC: Yes. I did go in and I did bias prevention training with the English Department. I think I did it twice. I think I did two sessions. As I say, I hate to train. I think it went okay. I don't think anybody really understood what happened. Maybe I shouldn't say it. Maybe you should turn the [recorder off].

KR: Sure. I will stop.

[TAPE PAUSED]

KR: We are back on the record. We were talking about bias training with the English Department.

CC: The first one I did by myself. Then, the second one I did with Mark Schuster, my boss. There were a lot of people in there, and I didn't want to be handling them all by myself. I don't think the second one went as well. Oh, I know. The second one involved graduate students. Yes, that's what it was. That's why Mark came with me, because there were students. The second one involved--there were the students in the English Department. Yes, I did do that.

KR: What has your involvement been with the Newark Pride Alliance?

CC: That organization came into effect after the Sakia Gunn murder in Newark, I think, in [2003]. I wasn't a part of it from the beginning. What we had begun to do is work with this afterschool program for LGBT youth in Newark. We would do a Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter dinner. Then, we started doing work on LGBT veterans. So, we did, I think, three programs. The most successful one was in Newark on LGBT veterans. We would have a panel of LGBT veterans talk about their experiences and elicit responses from those in the audience. My involvement with them has been that. We don't do enough, but nobody else wants to do more. I don't know what our next project will be.

KR: How did you meet your partner?

CC: Barbara [Balliet], over a program. She ran the undergraduate program for Women's Studies for many years. When she first came, her boss wanted her to do a program called "Beyond Heterosexism," and she told her to work with me. So, we did a program on College Avenue, "Beyond Heterosexism," and we addressed issues of teaching about LGBT people in the classroom. Actually, the most wonderful thing about the program were the students who attended. They were mostly Women's Studies students, but they were in a number of organizations. They had taken Women's Studies courses, but they were really wonderful in terms of asking questions and responding to issues. That was how we met. That was in the spring of '92. In the fall of '92, we started going out. [laughter] Then, by January of '93, we were in a relationship. That's how we met. We've been together twenty-six years.

KR: For the record, when did you get married?

CC: 2016, we got married then.

KR: Tell us about your life here in Hobart, New York and the different activities that you are involved in.

CC: Well, for many years, I was going back and forth to New Jersey. That stopped. I'm glad about that because I'm sick of that drive. I'm involved in helping Barbara with her bookstore [Blenheim Hill Books]. I'm also involved in co-organizing the Hobart Festival of Women Writers, which we just had two weeks ago. I still do work in New York. I still do readings. I'm still involved with stuff down there. I'm retired, basically. That's what life is like up here. We have good neighbors--some Republicans and more Democrats that we know about. Actually, the man that is running for a seat in Congress for this district is black, [Antonio] Delgado. I'm going to go see him in the county seat, which is Delhi, this weekend. I'm going to go hear him speak. The politicians are much closer. They're much more immediate than they are in New Jersey, than I've experienced before. We're trying to get involved with some get-the-vote-out efforts up here, to get the Democrats out to vote in the midterms and to try to change things. [Editor's Note: In November 2018, Antonio Delgado won in New York's 19th congressional district, beating John Faso.]

KR: Do you have any questions that you thought of?

JK: I did have one. I wanted to hear a quick response. I don't know if it lends itself to a quick response, but how does it feel, as a retired person that has done a lot of activist work over their career, to see the contemporary Black Liberation Movement being consciously, invisibly led by black and queer women.

CC: I think it's great. I shouldn't say it like this, but I wish they were doing more. I wish I could hear more about it. I think it's wonderful, also surprising. I heard [Alicia] Garza [co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement] speak, actually two years ago, at a conference on June Jordan at UMASS Amherst. They did a big conference on June. Garza was one of the speakers. She was quite good. She had her rap down. I wish I could hear more. I wish I could hear what they want us to do, in terms of black lives. I wish there were more we could do about police brutality, the kind of license police still take with black lives. I wish there was more we could do. I wish we could be organized more to do it. Maybe it's just because I'm out of it. I don't know. We were talking about--maybe it's because of my age, but we were talking about black power. Well, there wasn't a day that went by that you didn't hear that. Perhaps, it's the way women lead. Their leadership, I think, is more subtle. It certainly is more democratic. I guess that's how I feel. I'm happy it's happening. I'm happy somebody still uses the term black, gives it new prominence. I wish there were more.

KR: We have talked about a lot of topics. What did we skip over that you would like to add or talk about?

CC: I don't know. I'm still thinking about that question about LGBT equity, how did your office--and I'm not going to change my answer, but what I want to say is I think students did far more than my office ever did. Students demanded far more and continued to demand far more than my office ever did. I think any kind of equity at Rutgers for LGBT people--transgender is different because that's a later development. They had infrastructure to fall back on. I'm not trying to dismiss their needs, but I think

students did it more than my office, frankly. Actually, they did it for transgender, too. As I say, transgender had more support when it came along. So, yes. I'm thinking about that. What did your office change? I'll have to think about that. No, you asked me about everything. Yes, you went over everything.

KR: Great. Well, thank you so much for having us into your home and doing this interview. I will stop the recording.

CC: Okay. Thank you, Kate.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Transcribed by Molly Graham 10/18/2018
Reviewed by Kate Rizzi 11/5/18
Reviewed by Cheryl Clarke 12/5/18

Addendum to Oral History Project, Sept. 21, 2018

In response to the question, "What did your office [Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian Gay Concerns, later Office of Social Justice Education and LGBT Concerns] do to create equity for LGBT students?" I want to add some clarification or expansion to what I said on 9/21.

For greater understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer life at Rutgers, please consult THE PRESIDENT'S SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT ON LESBIAN/GAY CONCERNS, 1988. This will provide a backdrop for you on the history of the LGBT community at Rutgers, since 1969.

I think I should provide a more respectful description of the goals accomplished by my office during my seventeen years as its Director. To not do so would be dismissive of all the staff and faculty who worked with me during those years as members of the campus-wide committee on LGBT concerns and all those who served as Liaisons for LGBT students in their various offices and departments. In terms of the issue of equity, I believe the Office was a bulwark against intolerance and homophobic behavior. In 1981, "sexual orientation" was added to the University's nondiscrimination policy. In the mid-90's "gender identity" was added to University's nondiscrimination policy because of the activism of my office and LGBT student leaders. If Monica Barrett still works in the office of university counsel, she worked with us on these issues. She also might be someone you could do an oral history with.

In the Spring of 1999, I received the Human Dignity Award for work on diversity and social justice projects since 1969 from the University Committee to Advance Our Common Purposes.

Because I had already been at the University since 1969 (except for the years 1974-1978), I had a profile. People knew me, knew I was an out lesbian-feminist, and knew I

stood up for marginalized communities. So, that brought attention to the office. Everyone I worked for and with, except my next to last boss, Gregory Blimling, the Vice President for Student Affairs (2001-2010), thought I was an outstanding administrator.

As chief advocate and campus-wide ombudsperson for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, (queer and questioning) students, including the initiation, provision, and coordination of: services, programs, and co-curricular activities about/ for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, I was responsible for:

> Acting as a resource to a university-wide network of "Liaisons," who act as advisers to LGBT students seeking assistance;
>
> Creating the first annual programs for LGBT students, staff, faculty and allies, e.g. Annual Fall Reception for LGBT Communities and Our Friends, Rainbow Graduation;
>
> Producing the first student handbook on LGBT issues and resources, *Beyond Polarities, A Handbook on Queer Issues for All* and the first staff manual, *A Guidebook on LGBT Issues* for Rutgers Staff in 1994;
>
> Hosting the first Lesbian and Gay Alumni/ae Reunion in May of 1996;
>
> Sponsoring a year-long celebration of the 30th Anniversary of LGBT Pride and Activism with thirty-six other campus entities, 1999-2000;
>
> Chairing the Taskforce on LGBT Concerns, which acted as a social and educational resource for students, staff, and faculty on LGBT issues;
>
> Establishing the Lionel Cuffie Award for Activism and Excellence, given to a graduating senior who demonstrates leadership and scholarship.
>
> Establishing the Rainbow Graduation, which honors all LGBT graduating seniors, graduate students, and allies with rainbow tassels.

My Office was also responsible for the administration of the Committee to Advance Our Common Purposes, the Rutgers program that fosters diversity programming and honors individuals and groups that create programs and activities advancing diversity within the University. It also was responsible for identifying persons to receive the Human Dignity Award, which the University President awarded recipients at an annual celebration.

I was mostly satisfied with my work except for about three years when Old Queens appointed faculty person Emmett Dennis, who also was at that time Dean of University College, to be V.P. of Student Affairs. President Francis Lawrence appointed him. He and Dennis knew nothing about the field of Student Affairs, and Lawrence cared even less. But Dennis allowed his second in command, Victoria Ukachukwu, to bully all the Student Affairs Directors. They were both to greater and lesser degrees homophobic.

So, my work became questionable. One year, they demoted me from a twelve-month appointment to a ten-month appointment, which put me in a precarious position, because it reduced my salary by more than ten thousand dollars.

I fought for a year to regain my twelve-month appointment. Luckily, luckily, I regained it. I am particularly proud of a fundraiser my office coordinated in 2005-2006 for the people affected by Hurricane Katrina. We raised about five thousand dollars through the sale of tickets to a poetry reading and music performance, featuring Amiri Baraka (oh so many books, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*), Erika Hunt (poet, essayist, avant-gardist, executive director of 21st Century Foundation at the time, author of several seminal books of poetry, e.g., *Piece Logic*), Jewelle Gomez (playwright, novelist, poet, author of *The Gilda Stories*), Miguel Algarin (founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, poet, and author of many books). Members of the Mason Gross Jazz Program performed wonderful music. The money was donated to the nonprofit, 21st Century, which was sponsoring recovery work on the Gulf Coast.

By then, we also gained a new V.P. of Student Affairs, Greg Blimling. Even though he thought I lacked what it took to be a good administrator--don't ask me why--he was not homophobic. He even encouraged us to develop a center, which did eventually come to pass, on the Livingston Campus in 2009-10, with a new Assistant Director, whom I hired the year before to manage LGBT student life.

I went on to become the Dean of Students of the Livingston Campus in 2010, reporting to a Senior Dean of Students, Mark Schuster, who now heads Graduate Student Life in New Brunswick. He might be an interesting person to interview. I retired in 2013 to modest fanfare. I got a lot of nice gifts at my retirement party.

In the Fall of 2013, a group of young Queer people, Steven G. Fullwood, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, and Darnell L. Moore, convened a gathering at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, Livingston Campus to honor me, called "Cheryl Clarke: A Future Retrospective."
The gathering featured talks and readings by Cheryl Wall, Abena Busia, Evie Shockley, Aimee Meredith Cox, E. Frances White, Breena Clarke, Aishah Shahidah Simmons, Rickey Laurentis, J P Howard, Tiona McClodden, Alexis DeVeaux, and many, many more.